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ABRAHAM AND THE MERCHANTS OF URA

CYRUS H. GORDON

PROFESSOR Jean Nougayrol has published an important corpus of Akkadian tablets from the south archives of Ugarit, under the title *Le Palais royal d'Ugarit*, IV, *Textes accadiens des archives sud* (*Archives internationales*) (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1956) (abbreviated *PRU*, IV). Most of these documents were sent to Ugarit from other places including Hattusa, the Hittite capital.

On pp. 103-5 of *PRU*, IV there is a tablet (17.130) from Hattusili III (reigned ca. 1282-1250 B.C.) to Niqmepa^c,¹ King of Ugarit, regulating the status and activities of Hattusili's merchants who were conducting business in Ugarit. The merchants of the Hittite King come from the city of Ura; in line 6 they are called *mârūmeš alū-ra awlūmeš tamkârū*, "merchant men,² citizens of the city of Ura." Ura was a city whose men specialized in *tamkârūtum*, "foreign trade," the *métier* of the *tamkârum*, "merchant." (For other tablets mentioning the many merchants of Ura, see *PRU*, IV, 190, 203, 256.)

Niqmepa^c had lodged complaints to Hattusili against the Ura merchants operating in Ugarit (*PRU*, IV, 103, l. 7).

¹ The succession of the Ugaritic kings is full of problems. I have shown (*Antiquity*, XXIX [1955], 147-49) that we may have to reckon with dyarchy (double kingship) at Ugarit, perhaps in the manner of Sparta. When Niqmad writes to Niqmepa^c as a complete equal (*aḥu*, "brother"), dispensing with the royal titles of sender and addressee (text 17.315, *PRU*, IV, 111) such as kings of different nations use when writing to each other, we need not assume with Nougayrol that this Niqmad must be a king of some other realm writing to King Niqmepa^c of Ugarit. They may well be simultaneously ruling kings of Ugarit: one residing in the capital, while the other attends to affairs elsewhere. If dyarchy was practiced at Ugarit, it will affect the chronology.

Accordingly Hattusili regulated their activities as follows: The Ura merchants could ply their trade in Ugarit only during the summer (literally *i-na e-bu-ri*, "in the harvest"). Since most people could pay only when the crops had produced "cash," the season for profitable trading was more or less confined to the summer anyway. During the winter (*i-na ūmāti^{mi-ti} ku-uš-ši*, "in the days of cold": ll. 13-14), the merchants of Ura had to clear out of Ugarit and return to their own land. This kept the merchants on the move and prevented them from exploiting unduly their theaters of operation. Moreover Hattusili decreed that the Ura merchants were not to buy Ugaritic real estate (*bītāti^{bā} eqlāti^{meš}*). (That all real estate may have been considered royal domain in Ugarit is hinted in line 33 where the term "real estate" is expressly defined as *ša šār mā^{ti}ū-ga-ri-it*, "belonging to the King of Ugarit.")³ On the other hand, the King of Ugarit was not to prevent the merchants of Ura from seizing the persons (together with the wives and children) of Ugaritic debtors who could not repay the merchants (ll. 25-31).

This tablet reflects a number of social phenomena of significance for an understanding of the ancient Near East. First, strong rulers controlled a class of semi-official merchants who were allowed to

² Many of the so-called determinatives in cuneiform are often meant to be pronounced. That this is the case with *awlū^{meš}* is indicated not only by the *meš*-sign, but also from parallel usage such as *anāšim²* *aḥim²* *anāḥnū* (Gen. 13:8; called to my attention by Mr. Svi Rin).

³ Lev. 25:23-34 forbids the sale of real estate in Israel except urban dwellings (vs. 30) in non-Levitical (vs. 32) walled cities.

conduct business in vassal or weaker kingdoms.⁴ In periods of more or less stable international relations, *tamkârûtum* was controlled. One of the means of preventing excessive exploitation was to keep the merchants on the move. We also see that there were pressures to prevent the merchants from acquiring real estate (and this incidentally reflects the merchants' desire to buy land).

The above evidence throws new light on the patriarchal narratives of Genesis. For some strange reason, little if any attention has been paid to the repeated statement in Genesis that the patriarchs were in Palestine for trading. Joseph is represented as telling his brethren that if they can establish the fact that they are bona fide and honest, they may trade ($\sqrt{s\bar{h}r}$) in the land (Gen. 42:34). We may assume that Joseph is depicted as knowing the occupational pursuits of his own family. The trading interests of the patriarchs are confirmed by Gen. 34:10, where the Shechemites invite Jacob's household to unite with them: "And with us you may dwell and the land shall be before you; dwell and trade ($\sqrt{s\bar{h}r}$) therein, and acquire real estate in it." This passage brings out three basic features of the *tamkârû* in the document of Hattusili cited above. (1) The patriarchs, like the merchants of Ura, went abroad to do business. (2) Settling down in a foreign area of opportunity would normally be pleasing to men who were regularly kept on the move (indeed Hebrew *sôhēr*, "merchant," means literally "one who turns hither and yon"). And (3) acquiring real estate in the land of their activity was a chronic wish of the merchants that was generally denied to them.

⁴ Thus when Damascus was in the ascendant, Damascene merchants operated in Samaria; but when Ahab defeated Ben-Hadad, the situation was reversed, and Israelite merchants were admitted to Damascus (I Kings 20:34).

These considerations put Genesis, chapter 23 in new perspective. The emphasis on Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite, in the presence of the Hittite enclave at Hebron, reflects the unusual character of the transaction. It was no routine affair for a merchant to acquire real estate abroad. The mercantile background seems also to be reflected in the expression describing the 400 shekels of silver that Abraham paid to Ephron; it is called *ôvēr las-sôhēr* (vs. 16).

The sale of Machpelah follows Hittite law⁵ and was transacted before a Hittite community. How much of a hold the Hittite Empire had on Hebron at that time is hard to say. Probably the proximity to Egypt made of Palestine a sort of no-man's land where both the Egyptians and Hittites tolerated each other's commercial enterprise. In the north, around Ugarit, the King in Hattusa regulated the activities of his merchants with a firm hand. In Palestine his merchants would have a freer hand but would have to provide for their own security. Abraham may have been tempted to ply his trade as far south as Palestine for the freedom of opportunity he thereby gained. At the same time he had to secure the interests of his household and of his kinsmen by maintaining his own militia and by forming alliances with local Amorite chieftains (Gen. 14:13-14, 24).

The fact that the patriarchs wandered and owned flocks⁶ has beclouded our

⁵ M. F. Lehmann, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 129 (Feb. 1953), pp. 15-18.

⁶ Not only village farmers but even city folk in the Near East often own cattle. This has been the case from remote antiquity to the present day. One of the familiar scenes that impress the tourist in the Near East is the flocks being counted as they return within the city walls for the night. Hammurapi's Code takes no notice of nomadism, but it does deal with flocks belonging to the settled population including urbanites. The patriarch's kinsmen in Aram-Naharayim owned cattle, but Gen. 24:10, 13 leaves no doubt that they lived in a city.

understanding of the Genesis narratives. Business was conducted through payments of animals as well as gold and silver in Near East antiquity. In Genesis 23 we have noted that Abraham was able to pay out large sums of silver. Moreover Gen. 13:2 and 24:35 tell us that he was rich in gold and silver (cf. Gen. 20:16) as well as cattle. His wandering was not nomadism in the Bedouin sense, but was an occupational feature of *tamkârûtum*, "trading abroad." The patriarchal narratives, far from reflecting Bedouin life, are highly international in their milieu, in a setting where a world order enabled men to travel far and wide for business enterprise. (Text 17.229, *PRU*, IV, 106, shows that international law prevented the robbing and slaying of merchants with impunity. If the criminals were not apprehended, the town in whose precincts the crime was committed had to make good.) Abraham comes from beyond the Euphrates, plies his trade in Canaan, visits Egypt, deals with Hittites, makes treaties with Philistines, forms military alliances with Amorites, fights kinglets from as far off as Elam, marries the Egyptian Hagar, etc. His contacts and freedom of movement reflect a sophisticated milieu where an international order (such as the Amarna Age) made such a career and such enterprise possible.

It is probable that *Ūra* (which would come into Hebrew as *Ūr*, without the final vowel⁷) is Ur of the Chaldees, Abraham's birthplace. In any case, Ur of the Chaldees can hardly be Babylonian Ur in the south. Gen. 11:31 tells us that Terah

moved from Ur of the Chaldees via Haran en route to Canaan. Any route from the Ur excavated by Sir C. Leonard Woolley to Canaan would not go so far north or east as Haran. The Ur of the Chaldees in Genesis has to be north or east (probably northeast) of Haran for Terah's itinerary to make sense. By the same token, the "Chaldees" of Abraham's Ur have nothing to do with Babylonia. There are two Chaldean localities quite distant from each other. Babylonian Chaldea is well-known and requires no further comment here. It is the other Chaldea that concerns us. Xenophon mentions the Chaldeans as a warlike people blocking the way to Armenia (*Anabasis* iv.3.4), and as neighbors of the Armenians but at war with them (*Cyropaedia* iii.1.34); he speaks of them in connection with the Carduchi (= Kurds) in *Anabasis* v.5.17. In Isa. 23:13 the Land of the Chaldeans cannot be located in Babylonia, for what precedes and follows it point to a northern location. Not recognizing the existence of a northern Chaldea, commentators have suggested a number of emendations such as "Canaanites" (Ewald, Schrader) and "Kittim" (Duhm). Let us also recall that *Hald-* is one of the ancient designations of Armenia/Urartu (see E. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*, I, 2, 2d ed. [Stuttgart & Berlin, 1909], p. 622).

It is interesting to note that Kéśed (the eponymous ancestor of the Kaśdīm, "Chaldeans") in Gen. 22:22 is mentioned immediately after Aram, and the whole setting is in the northern homeland of the patriarch's kinsmen. Observe also that Josh. 24:2-3 describes the land across the River (Euphrates), whence God brought Abraham to Canaan, as the land where "your ancestors had dwelt from eternity." This runs counter to any identification of Abraham's birthplace with Babylonian Ur. The northern locale of Abra-

⁷ The final vowel might be the short *-a* indicating the oblique case of a diptotic place name. But it is also conceivable that the *a* of *Ūra* is long, standing for the Aramaic positive article; thus *Ūrā* would mean "The City (or Station)." The Septuagint renders *Ur* (in Ur of the Chaldees) as *k^hā'ra*, "station, region." The patriarch's kinsmen around Haran are repeatedly called Arameans and according to Gen. 31:47 they speak Aramaic.

ham's nativity is further confirmed by Gen. 24:4, 7, where the land of his birth is clearly defined as the country that embraced the city of Haran and the area known as Paddan-Aram.

We need not rule out a linguistic relationship between the names of Babylonian Ur and the city of Ura in Hattusili's realm. There is abundant evidence that the Sumero-Akkadian moon cult, whose Babylonian center was Ur, had made an impact on the northern homeland of the patriarchs well beyond the confines of Haran. Text 17.146 (*PRU*, IV, 157) records that the Sumerian moon-goddess Ningal (worshiped as Nikkal at Ugarit) was the Lady of at least two other towns: *alnu-ba-an-na* and *algur-a-ti*.

All of the intricate problems posed by the patriarchal narratives are not going to be solved at one fell swoop by this article or by any other single discovery. Nor is it my intention to plead for the late date of those narratives here. But this much is certain: So far, most of the abundant evidence bearing on the narratives is of northern provenance, notably from Nuzu, Ugarit, and now Hattusa;

and it comes from within a century of the Amarna Age, plus and minus.

The narratives themselves are tendentious: they seek to justify Israel's possession of the Holy Land through the divine Covenant, and through treaties and purchases, going back to the days of Abraham. Yet the narratives run so true to the social, economic, political, religious, and literary pictures that we get from documents of the Amarna Age that we are obliged to attribute genuine second millennium sources (written or oral) to them.

It is now clear that Abraham was a merchant prince⁸; a *tamkârum* from the Hittite⁹ realm. That his birthplace, Ur of the Chaldees, was Ura, whence so many merchants came, is, though not proved, quite likely.

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⁸ Ephron addresses him not only as "My Lord" but as *n'esi' 'elohim*, "an exalted prince" (Gen. 23:6). For *'elohim* to indicate grandeur, cf. *naftâlê 'elohim*, "mighty struggles" (Gen 30:8).

⁹ The Hittite contribution to Israel will doubtless appear more and more significant during the years ahead. The full meaning of Ezek. 16:3 ("thy father is the Amorite, and thy mother is Hittite") is yet to come.